

## THE EPISODE OF THE THREE LEAPS IN ALFRED DÖBLIN'S *DIE DREI SPRÜNGE DES WANG-LUN*

by Francis Lide

Alfred Döblin's *Die drei Sprünge des Wang-lun* (1915)<sup>1</sup> is significant not only because it is his first mature novel and perhaps his finest before *Berlin Alexanderplatz*; it is also the first work to reflect the decisive influence of oriental religion and philosophy on his world view. The theme of "nicht widerstreben," of Taoist piety in passivity first enunciated in *Wang-lun*, was to become the most important single theme in his works up to and including the Berlin novel. The novel gets its title from an episode toward the end of the book in which the hero plants his sword in the ground beside a small brook. He then jumps across the brook three times to illustrate to a companion his spiritual development. This key episode for the interpretation of the work has been mentioned in passing by the critics but has never been subjected to a close reading in the light of the novel as a whole. Such a reading will be attempted here.

As a prerequisite to understanding the episode of the three leaps, the background against which it occurs must be reconstructed. Before his conversion, Wang Lun is an ignorant, runaway fisherman's son given to loutish pranks and senseless acts of violence. He becomes a highwayman in the Nan Ku mountains, where he meets the hermit Ma Noh, a Bhuddist monk who helps give direction to a budding spiritual ferment in Wang. After experiencing a profound illumination, Wang founds his religious sect, "die Wahrhaft Schwachen," and enunciates its ancient Taoist teaching in a sermon to the bandits and social outcasts who are his first followers:

Man hat nicht gut an uns getan: das ist das Schicksal. Man wird nicht gut an uns tun: das ist das Schicksal. Ich habe es auf allen Wegen, auf den Äckern, Straßen, Bergen, von den alten Leuten gehört,

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daß nur eins hilft gegen das Schicksal: nicht widerstreben. . . . Ich muß den Tod über mich ergehen lassen und das Leben über mich ergehen lassen und beides unwichtig nehmen, nicht zögern, nicht hasten. Und es wäre gut, wenn ihr wie ich tötet. Denn alles andere ist ja aussichtslos. Ich will wunschlos, ohne Schwergewicht das Kleine und Große tragen, mich abseits wenden, wo man nicht tötet. . . . Ich will ein Ende machen mit dem Morden und Rächen; ich komme damit nicht von der Stelle. . . . Ich will arm sein, um nichts zu verlieren. Der Reichtum läuft uns auf der Straße nach; er wird uns nicht einholen. . . . Nicht handeln; wie das weiße Wasser schwach und folgsam sein; wie das Licht von jedem dünnen Blatt abgleiten.<sup>2</sup>

The theme of the novel is not so much the teaching itself as the difficulty of realizing it in the social context and within the individual. While Wang's brotherhood of the Truly Weak grows rapidly into large hordes of gentle but vulnerable wandering mendicants, he leaves his followers to journey to a distant city to seek the protection of one of China's secret societies. As a pledge of this protection, he receives from the society a large, two-handed sword which he always carries and which becomes his trademark. By assuming the role of protector, however, Wang is no longer practicing the gentle quietism he preaches. Significantly, the sword is named "der Gelbe Springer," the connotations being that it wields itself in the hand of the user, that there dwells within it an independent spirit of violence.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Ma Noh adheres strictly to the teaching of passivity, but forms a separatist movement called "die Gebrochene Melone," whose members of both sexes abandon the previously important rule of chastity. A melon broken open and no longer protected by the rind, Ma's sect resolutely affirms the total vulnerability inherent in the precept of "nicht widerstreben." When large numbers of his followers fall victim to an unprovoked massacre by provincial troops, Ma seeks to prevent the physical extermination of his movement by taking over a walled city and setting up a priestly state with himself as head. In doing so, however, he not only perverts his teaching but provokes the repression of the imperial government, so that he and his followers are completely wiped out.

Fearing for the safety of his followers, Wang directs them to disperse and abandon all visible practices that would identify them as members of the sect. Wang himself flees to the south of China, settles there, takes up the life of a peasant, and marries. For all practical purposes, he ceases to strive toward his sect's ideal of religious perfection. For a while the leaderless Truly Weak are protected by an imperial edict that they be tolerated. When the

emperor revokes the edict and the first repressions against the brethren begin, several of Wang's followers come south to fetch him as their leader and protector. The movement is drawn into an armed revolt against the emperor which, under the influence of the secret society whose aid Wang seeks, becomes an uprising to overthrow the foreign Manchu dynasty. Not only has Wang led his followers to abandon their quietist precepts, but the motives for doing so are falsified by extraneous political factors.

The aggressiveness and self-assertive activism which stem from Wang's role as protector of his followers also lead him to repeated backsliding from his ideal of personal piety. In addition to breaking the rule of chastity, Wang frequently reverts to the brutal hoaxes and other senseless acts of violence that characterized his behavior before his conversion. These relapses become so frequent during the fury of the uprising against the imperial government that Wang almost loses sight of his beliefs entirely. At one point before the final defeat, a hardened criminal who has been apprehended is brought before Wang before being thrown into chains. Strangely attracted by this image of his former self before his conversion, Wang later pays the criminal a secret visit in the dungeon. But the sight of the brutalized prisoners awakens in Wang the sudden and intense insight that his life would have taken the same inexorable course had it not been for his conversion. He is led to an inner reaffirmation of the nearly forgotten teaching of pious acquiescence in the Tao. It is at this point—after Wang's insight has been reawakened and when, after a series of defeats, the physical annihilation of the Truly Weak is certain—that the episode of the three leaps occurs. Wang is outside the city engaged in discourse with his closest follower, called "die Gelbe Glocke":

Er nahm seinen Strohhut ab, zog seinen Kopf aus der Schlinge seines Schwertseils, dann stach er das Schwert in den weichen Boden, stülpte den Hut über den Knauf, schwang die Arme und setzte die Beine, als wenn er Anlauf nehme: "Aufgestanden, Bruder Gelbe Glocke, ich mache Sprünge."

Mit einem Stütz stand er jenseits des Bächleins: "Jetzt bin ich auf Nan-ku. Ma-noh tut, was ich tun will. Es wird alles schlecht. Ich muß weiter springen."

Er sauste neben sein Schwert; der Hut flog vom Luftzug herunter: "Jetzt im Hia-ho. Eine schöne Zeit, Gelbe Glocke. Der Damm, der Hwang-ho, der Jang-tse; eine Frau hatte ich. Das Wu-wei kommt zu mir gewandert, noch bin ich nicht da, ich kann nicht so rasch folgen. Schlachte, mein gelbes Schwert! Und jetzt—"

Er hob sich im dritten Sprung über das Wasserlein: "Wo bin ich?"

Auf Nan-ku wieder, bei dir, Gelbe Glocke. Der Wink war gut. Die Verbrecher waren gut. Ich bin wieder zurückgekehrt aus dem Hia-ho, ich bin wieder zu Hause, in Tschili. Komm zu mir herüber, lieber, lieber, Bruder: bringe meinen Gelben Springer mit, denn hier muß gekämpft werden."<sup>4</sup>

The key to the above passage is the symbolism of the sword and its spatial relationship to Wang. In addition to the independent power of the sword suggested by its name, Wang's enslavement to the sword and to the role it imposes is suggested by the connotations of ensnarement in the word "Schlinge" used to denote the noose strung around his neck by which he had always carried it. When Wang plants his sword upright in the ground and throws his straw hat on the handle, hat and sword become almost a scarecrow caricature of unilluminated man dominated by drives of aggressive self-assertion. Accordingly, the side of the brook on which the sword stands represents the unawakened life, while the other side symbolizes the striving for a state of inner harmony with the Tao. Wang Lun's first leap illustrates his conversion, as the reference to the Nan Ku mountains, where the movement was founded, clearly indicates. The words "Ma-noh tut, was ich tun will" equate Ma Noh's past actions with Wang Lun's present intentions. As leader of his splinter sect, Ma attempted to act according to the conviction that it was better to allow the sect to meet its physical downfall than to depart from the precept of quietism. Wang's intimation that he has come to a similar insight is borne out by the rest of the novel. The words "es wird alles schlecht" can be interpreted as referring to Wang's despair, after the annihilation of Ma Noh's sect, that external circumstances would ever allow his followers to realize their new ideal of piety.

With the next leap, the symbolism of the sword is especially emphasized by the fact that Wang is described as jumping so close to it as to knock off the straw hat balanced on the handle. His sojourn on this side of the brook illustrates two external stages in his life which are considered as one in terms of his spiritual development—his life in the south as a peasant, and his active leadership of the nearly successful uprising against the Manchu dynasty. In the south he had abandoned his spiritual striving out of pessimism and for the sake of creature comforts; in the violence of the uprising the ideals of the movement were necessarily submerged completely. The statement "Das Wu-wei kommt zu mir gewandert" is consciously ambiguous. Used in the singular, the word *Wu Wei*, the Chinese term for "die Wahrhaft Schwachen," refers not only

to the members of the Truly Weak, but to the sect as a whole and the body of belief to which it subscribes. On one level, the reference is to the journey of several members of the sect to the south to bring Wang back to the north to resume the leadership of his oppressed brethren. But Wang adds: "Noch bin ich nicht da, ich kann nicht so rasch folgen. Schlachte, mein gelbes Schwert!" Although Wang returned to the physical leadership of his followers, his sword was so busy in the act of slaughter that he was unable to find his way back to *Wu Wei* in the abstract as a body of belief.

With the third leap, Wang has brought himself up to the time of the episode. He has, figuratively speaking, returned to Nan Ku, or the original purity of his beliefs. The reference to "die Verbrecher" refers, of course, to the experience in prison the night before. He interprets his experience with the criminals as being an omen ("Wink") of providence and "good" in the sense that it has led to an important and valid insight. As a result of this experience, he has returned from the south in spirit as well as body: "Ich bin wieder zurückgekehrt aus Hia-ho. . . ." Wang's last words to his companion: "Komm zu mir herüber, lieber, lieber Bruder: bringe meinen Gelben Springer mit, denn hier muß gekämpft werden," may seem problematical in the light of his newly restored faith. It must be noted, however, that Wang does not cross the brook to retrieve his sword but asks his follower to bring it over to the nonviolent side of the brook. Symbolically, he refuses to submit to the law of violent self-assertion in the sword but makes it, rather, a mere instrument to be used sparingly and defensively to allow the doomed brethren time to prepare themselves for their transmigrations in the beyond.

#### NOTES

1. Ed. Walter Muschg (Olten and Freiburg, 1960).
2. Ibid., pp. 79-80.
3. In the novel, Ma Noh explicitly interprets the sword in this manner (ibid., p. 160).
4. Ibid., pp. 465-466.